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Afghanistan

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Sideshow at the CIA

The Reagan administration persists in its support of the Nicaraguan contras' foredoomed effort to overthrow the Sandinista regime, while ignoring the CIA's pathetically botched effort to help the anti-Soviet freedom fighters in Afghanistan.

Our investigation of the agency's cavalier irresponsibility suggests that the Afghan military supply program is regarded at Langley as merely the latest chapter in a 150-year-old sideshow dubbed "The Great Game." That was the name first applied to the British-Russian struggle for control of Central Asia by a British captain in 1842. In fact, the determined, indigenous guerrilla movement in Afghanistan offers the best opportunity in decades to thwart Soviet expansionism and possibly force a humiliating Kremlin withdrawal.

A recent visit to the fabled Khyber Pass by Dale Van Atta offered evidence that times haven't changed much in that isolated corner of the Earth. The Khyber remains the most important passage between the plains of the Indian subcontinent and the uplands of Central Asia.

From a border outpost overlooking the Khyber, Van Atta saw the gaily decorated buses and trucks that shuttle trade goods—including drugs—along the winding road cut into the rock cliffs. Occasional stone tablets and cairns pay tribute to British regiments and battalions that fought and died in long-forgotten skirmishes of the Great Game.

A reminder of the Great Game's geopolitical significance is the papier-mâché "playboard"—a large outdoor relief map of the area with hilltops and villages labeled in English. It was produced for a recent visit by Jimmy Carter. The same border vantage point, incidentally, was where Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had himself photographed aiming a gun at the Soviet-controlled Afghan village in the distance.

It was during the Carter administration, following the Soviet invasion of December 1979, that the CIA laid down a foolish rule for its revival of the Great Game. The rule decreed that American aid to the Afghan rebels must be kept

secret. The CIA must at all costs preserve "plausible deniability" of its role.

The first corollary of this rule was that no American personnel would be linked to the arms supply. The disastrous effects of this lack of American control have been wholesale waste and corruption at every stage in the weapons pipeline, with the result that the freedom fighters actually receive, by our estimate, no more than 40 percent of the military supplies Congress has paid for.

The second corollary was that no American weapons could be provided to the *mujaheddin*—a ridiculous mandate that forced the CIA to buy inefficient and/or antique Soviet-made weapons from Egypt, Israel and China.

The CIA insisted in secret testimony to Congress that the Pakistanis would not allow U.S. arms to be shipped to the Afghan rebels, because it would embarrass the Islamabad government.

This argument was known, in CIA shorthand, as the "Eveready Line," because CIA briefers insisted that "the Pakistanis don't even want Eveready batteries going to the *mujaheddin*."

The official most ready with the Eveready Line was John McMahon, No. 2 man at the CIA until early last year. He was contradicted in closed testimony by Vernon Walters, a former CIA bigwig who is now ambassador to the United Nations, and Fred Iklé, defense undersecretary for policy.

Both Walters and Iklé had discussed the matter directly with the Pakistanis, who said they were perfectly willing to accept U.S. arms for the Afghans. The Pakistanis told Rep. Charles Wilson (D-Tex.) the same thing. But McMahon continued to lead CIA resistance to the dispatch of U.S. arms to the Afghans.

McMahon's resignation from the CIA in March 1986 was partly the result of a lobbying campaign by the Federation for American Afghan Action, which generated 10,000 letters to President Reagan objecting to McMahon's policy.

Unfortunately, others at the CIA have taken up where McMahon left off. For reasons yet unexplained, they refuse to play the Great Game to win.

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